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# Early Communication Between China and the Mediterranean

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## EARLY COMMUNICATION BETWEEN CHINA AND THE MEDITERRANEAN

The question of the date at which commercial relations were opened between Mediterranean lands and the Far East, especially China and Indo-China, arises frequently in history, particularly in the interpretation of historical texts. Such relations are assumed with the assumption of the existence in the trade of Mediterranean lands of materials having a Far Eastern origin. It may be of interest to refer briefly to some of the practical questions involved.

Commerce between nations or culture-fields presupposes an orderly state of society, an excess of production and a desire for things not locally produced, a reasonable security of trade routes and a medium or basis of exchange. Under nomadic or tribal conditions these requisites do not exist, nor can relations readily continue between well-ordered communities widely separated by natural barriers, or by savage or hostile tribes. Civilization dawned in fertile river valleys capable of supporting an agricultural population. Such were the Nile, Mesopotamia, the Punjab and the Ganges, and the great rivers of China and Indo-China widely separated at their mouths, but their sources close together. Between these valleys are wide tracts of desert and tremendous ranges of mountains. Relations between Egypt and Mesopotamia were facilitated by the short distance of about one hundred miles between the upper bend of the Euphrates and the Gulf of Alexandretta, a relatively fertile strip skirting the base of the mountains. Between the Punjab and the Ganges no natural barrier existed, and relations were early and continuous. Down the radiating river courses of the Far East mankind migrated in the direction of separation rather than intercourse. Until a comparatively late date, the barriers between the culture-fields of Mesopotamia and those further east were too great for regular communication to exist. The history of Babylonia is a succession of periods of domestic prosperity interrupted by the raiding and pillage of savage peoples who came down the eastern mountain passes and who were, in course of time, absorbed or expelled. Not until the Assyrian Empire is there apparently any evidence of the regular receipt of tribute from tribes near the Indus watershed, nor until the Persian Empire, any central administration whose authority was recognized from the Indus to the Mediterranean. Assyrian tribute lists

tell of "products of the mountain", by which we may understand Media and Armenia, and "wealth of the sea", a part only of the Arabian shore of the Persian Gulf. Beyond that shore were forty days of caravan routes to the South Arabian valleys that produced aromatics, reached also by sea from Egypt; but beyond the mountains eastward after a climb of 5,250 feet above the valley of the Tigris, were 1,500 miles, mainly desert, to the valley of the Oxus, and 500 more, including the Khaibar Pass, 3,400 feet, to the Punjab. Thence to the Vale of Kashmir, 250 miles and a climb of 5,000 to 8,000 feet. From the Oxus to the sands of Turkestan were about 800 miles with the great range of the Pamirs intervening, and the Bolor Pass of some 14,000 feet to negotiate. Once east of the Pamirs, 1,600 miles of desert separated the traveler from the western rim of Chinese civilization, and 2,000 miles from its ancient capital, Singan-fu. By the southerly route from Babylon to the mouth of the Indus were nearly 2,000 miles of mountain and desert. The shores of the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean between those points were sparsely peopled by tribes possessing no culture and barely the means of subsistence. The route chart itself explains why the outlook of both Egypt and Babylonia was toward Asia Minor and the Aegean rather than the forbidding East, and why the furthest commercial venturing in that direction in early times was toward the incense lands that bordered the Gulf of Aden.

Arrian, the historian of Alexander's campaigns, speaks of the tribes to the west of the Indus as having been in ancient times subject to the Assyrians, afterwards to the Medes, and as having submitted finally to the Persians.<sup>1</sup> Again he says that the Persians were not a sea-faring people, and that when they conquered Babylonia they obstructed the Euphrates to prevent attack by invaders coming from the south.<sup>2</sup> While they subsidized one coastwise exploring expedition from the Indus westward, it led apparently to no permanent results. Such sea trade as existed in the Persian Gulf Aristobulus indicates was done upon rafts.<sup>3</sup> Navigation was general in Babylonia from a very early date, but the vessels were river-craft, of types that would have been useless in the open sea. Arrian states the theoretical possibility of navigating from the mouth of the Euphrates to the head of the Red

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<sup>1</sup> Indica 1  
Anab. Alex. 7, 7

<sup>2</sup> Herodotus, 4, 44

<sup>3</sup> Strabo 16. 3.3

Sea, but asserts that this had never been done on account of the heat and desolateness of the country. Egyptian ships had coasted the southern shore of Arabia, but turned back because the water put into their ships did not allow a longer voyage. The Persian armies that conquered Egypt had gone overland across Arabia, traveling eight days over a country waterless and desolate, carrying water for themselves on the camels' backs and journeying by night because of their inability to keep under the open sky during the day.<sup>4</sup> The return voyage of a part of Alexander's army by sea from the Indus to the Euphrates was made in vessels built by his command in the Punjab; and along the entire course, which is minutely recorded, boats are mentioned at only two places, and those but wretched fishing craft.<sup>5</sup> The most of the people living along the shore were found to have no boats and to depend for their scanty supply of fish upon the ebbing of the tide. That part of the army that made the journey by land nearly perished in the desert, and destroyed most of their wagons because the wheels sank so deep in the sand that they could not be drawn by man or beast.<sup>6</sup> When Alexander decided to make the lower Euphrates navigable, he had a fleet of Phoenician galleys taken to pieces and carried overland to Thapsacus and thence floated down stream. The same thing was done by Sennacherib for his campaign at the mouth of the Euphrates, the navy being supplied by Phoenicians from the Mediterranean, who, if we may follow a rendering in the new Jewish revision,<sup>7</sup> received in return a concession of sea trade in the Persian Gulf: "Behold the land of the Chaldeans! This is the people that was not, when Asshur founded it for shipmen." And we may infer that it was they who organized such sea trade as the Chaldean kingdom may have had, and that it was their descendants, driven out by the Persians, who settled at Gerrha in Arabia and continued the trade.<sup>8</sup> To the existence of sea trade with Western India we have a few allusions in Buddhist writings which cannot be dated before the Persian conquest, or their facts before the Neo-Babylonian period.<sup>9</sup>

Soon after the Christian era, and for a period of about two centuries, relations were constant and commerce active over a

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<sup>4</sup> Indica 43: cf. Anab. Alex. 7, 20

<sup>5</sup> Indica 27

<sup>6</sup> Anab. Alex. 6, 25

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 23. 13: Cf. the Kouyunjik ship reliefs in Layard's Nineveh.

<sup>8</sup> Strabo 16.3, 3

<sup>9</sup> Baveru Jataka, Cambridge ed. III, 339. Supparaka Jataka ibid. IV, 138-142. Digha Nikaya I, 222

sequence of trade routes that stretched from Britain to the Mediterranean, and thence to the China Sea. Abundant records remain of that trade, and of the ports and border stations where it was exchanged. Vessels from the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf coasted the ports of Western India, where they found an efficient lighthouse and pilotage system. At the Tamil ports in southern India they found larger and perhaps more numerous vessels that traded to the Golden Coast of southern Burma, whence there was a river trade-route that led to the highlands of China, or ocean routes as far as its southern coast.<sup>10</sup> From the Euphrates and Tigris to the Pamirs there was a succession of caravan stations providing shelter for man and beast, and a silk market in a valley of the Pamirs where trade was carried on by barter.<sup>11</sup> The silk industry flourished in Western Turkestan and was in regular communication across the desert with western China. But the discoveries of Stein point toward the 2nd or 3rd Century B. C. as its point of departure.<sup>12</sup> The recent excavations at Taxila, that great stronghold of north-western India, point to a period of growth that began with the Persian Empire, when Achaemenid officers brought the Aramaic alphabet to the Punjab.<sup>13</sup> The Chinese Annals, so far as they have been made available, indicate no knowledge of lands west of the Pamirs before the Parthian period.<sup>14</sup> The same condition is shown upon reference to the Turkish tribes who, in early times, were parasites upon Chinese civilization and dwelt to the north of China. It was the construction of the Great Wall of China in the 3rd century B. C. and the adoption of a vigorous policy against these tribes which forced them westward across the great desert to seek their prey elsewhere, and it is at about this time that we find them impinging upon Graeco-Bactrian and Seleucid dominions followed by Chinese troops,<sup>15</sup> and thus incidentally bridging the gaps in the communication between the Near East and Far East. Hindu and Tamil literature also suggests a trading impulse of the Parthian period.<sup>16</sup> This is not surprising in view of the relations

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<sup>10</sup> Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, 60; Paddinappalai I-40, 134-136: Pillai, *The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago*.

<sup>11</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus 23, 6: Parthian Stations of Isidorus of Charax.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Chavannes, *Les Documents Chinois découverts par Aurel Stein dans les sables du Turkestan Oriental*.

<sup>13</sup> *J R A S* 1915, pp. 340-7: Sir John Marshall, *A Guide to Taxila*, Ch. II.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient*, 35-40: Laufer, *Sino-Iranica*, Introduction.

<sup>15</sup> Czaplicka, *Turks of Central Asia*, 61-70. The Turks borrowed an Aramaic or Neo-Pehlevi alphabet at this time.

<sup>16</sup> Elliot, *Coins of Southern India*

between states in ancient India, which recent studies indicate were based on the assumption of the adjacency of states as a source of rivalry and difference.<sup>17</sup> The immediate neighbors of a state would be counted as hostile, those in the second zone as friendly, those in the third zone as hostile, so that there was a regular classification of central state, enemy, friend, enemy's friend, friend's friend and so on. Under such conditions commerce could hardly flourish. It was not until the post-Alexandrian conquests by the Mauryas that anything like political unity was attained in India, and that ambassadors, who were at the same time missionaries of religion, could be sent by Asoka to his contemporaries at Seleucia, Antioch and Alexandria, and in Macedonia, Epirus and Cyrene.<sup>18</sup> So little did the first Chinese envoy to visit the Euphrates, not far from the Christian era, know of the properties of salt water that he records having been deterred from venturing aboard ship on the ground that it would "make one long for home." So far as the Hebrew Scriptures can be relied upon for material in this connection, we do not find in them mention of unmistakably Eastern products except in sections that can be identified as surely post-exilic, and not until the book of Esther, probably one of the latest, is there direct mention of India.

Natural conditions support the historical record. The weather in the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman is unfavorable to navigation in primitive craft such as we know through Babylonian and Egyptian records. According to the "Persian Gulf Pilot"<sup>19</sup> the southwest monsoon is not felt inside Ras al Hadd. Winds are variable and treacherous. The prevailing wind is the northwestern called *shamal*, a dry wind densely loaded with dust and sand, so that the land is obscured. It comes without warning, and reaches the force of a hard gale, accompanied by a heavy swell, and even a steam vessel of small power is advised to obtain anchorage if possible, as it can make no headway against it. During the winter southeasters, called *kaus*, or *sharqi*, alternate with the *shamal*, sometimes so closely that a vessel anchored against the *kaus* may be driven ashore by the *shamal*. In winter strong northeasterly winds, called *nashi*, are experienced, and there is an occasional southwester, called *suhaili*, which blows into nearly all the sheltered anchorages on the Persian Coast. On the Makran coast the south-

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<sup>17</sup> Narendra Nath Law, *Interstate Relations in Ancient India*: cf. Kautiliya, book IV.

<sup>18</sup> Rock Inscriptions, Edict XIII (V. A. Smith, *Asoka*, p. 129-132)

<sup>19</sup> U. S. Hydrographic Office, No. 158, pp. 24-29

west monsoon is accompanied by a heavy swell which strikes the coast at an angle and is dangerous to small craft. The same authority warns of tidal currents, tide-rips, counter-currents and eddies, abreast of all large bays and bights, of which there are many along these coasts.

The climate is also described as unfavorable; intensely hot and humid in summer, rainless and cloudless and aggravated by dust-laden winds, and the more distressing because of the great heat at night; cold and boisterous in winter.

It is not surprising to find ships of the Mohammedan period offering sacrifices to the *jinni* of the sea upon entering or leaving the Persian Gulf or proceeding in fear of the fabled loadstone that might draw any ship to the bottom; or to read of the inhabitants of Hormuz lying at midday in pools of water to temper the scorching heat; or of the Persian envoy who found hunting in Oman "a matter of perfect ease, for the desert was filled with roasted gazelles".

Comparative distances are equally unfavorable to the circumnavigation of Arabia. By water, from the head of the Gulf of 'Akaba to the mouth of the Shatt-al-'Arab, it is about 3,900 miles; by land, about 800. Allowing about 40 miles to the day's caravan journey and 100 to the day's sail (both rather above the actual average) the caravan would take 20 days and the vessel 39. But this assumes for the vessel a continuity of favorable winds and weather, which is out of the question in the four courses involved—Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, Gulf of Aden and Red Sea. During only one or two months in the year could such a voyage be undertaken with any expectation of favorable weather, and the sea journey would have taken, on the average, about three times as long as the land journey.

Philostratus, in his *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*,<sup>20</sup> mentions the dangers to Egyptian shipping from the "barbarians who dwell on the right-hand side as you enter the Gulf" (i. e., the Red Sea). Ships carried complements of soldiers for protection, and the right of Egypt to navigate beyond the Straits of Bab-al-Mandab was limited at one time to one ship per season—a restriction rather like that which the Hohenzollern Kaiser wished to impose upon the United States.

The tribes of Southern Arabia, especially those east of Ras Fartak, were never brought into close relations with any northern civilization, and it must have been a hazardous undertaking for



any coasting vessel short of water to land on their shores to seek it. Arrian's assumption of the necessity of carrying on board all the water needed for the voyage was probably based on more than mere topography.

Between Egypt and India, at regularly alternating seasons, monsoon winds favor a continuous voyage. Between Babylonia and India monsoon winds can be utilized for about half the distance, the remainder being uncertain and often dangerous. Between Babylonia and Egypt conditions of navigation are generally unfavorable.<sup>21</sup>

In summary it may be said that products of India reached Mediterranean lands after the Persian conquest; that the loose system of government set up by the Persians resulted in the accumulation of great stores of tribute rather than the encouragement of trade; and that it was the reaction of the Greeks eastward which first combined traders with military enterprise and resulted in the establishment and maintenance of trading cities along the highways of commerce. It was as a result of the plans of Alexander that Alexandria and Antioch, Charax and Seleucia, Bactra, Taxila and Kashgar became foci of world business, that trading fleets were subsidized and protected and caravan routes laid out with stations at intervals of a day's journey and likewise protected from attack; and it was not until the Parthian conquest of the eastern portion of Alexander's domain that the predatory nomad established himself as a protector of trade routes for his own advantage, and trade with China was undertaken. This was the sequence of events that made possible the wonderful prosperity of the epoch from Augustus to Marcus Aurelius. The diplomacy of that period, so far as it can be traced, was aimed at relieving commerce of burdensome exactions, or at destroying raiders and pirates; and its civilization came to an end when government became too weak to control these forces of destruction.

Commerce between India and the Mediterranean dates, therefore, from the Persian Empire, with an interesting possibility of sea trade between Western India and the Euphrates during the Neo-Babylonian period. Commerce between China, or even Turkish lands in Central Asia, and the Mediterranean dates from the Bactrian and Parthian period.

The discoveries in recent years have not materially altered

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<sup>21</sup> Some further considerations on these practical questions affecting ancient sea trade will be found in the present writer's *The Ship Tyre*, Longmans 1920, ch. IV, "Ophir Voyages".

the views expressed by historians of a century ago, as, for instance, Vincent in his "Commerce and Navigation of the Ancients" that it was as a "consequence of the genius of Alexander that communication was opened between Europe and the most distant countries of Asia, and a foundation laid for the modern system of international commerce."



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